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AUTHOR Thiesmeyer, John
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ABSTRACT

Writing problems common among many college students are "phrasal" errors such as limited vocabulary, inability to distinguish standard usage from slang or jargon, a tendency to frame thoughts in cliches, a peppering of meaningless intensifiers, and a gift for redundancy and wordiness. To help correct these problems, a text-checking system called EDITOR, which uses microcomputers as word processors and commercially available text-checking software, was developed. Offering students critical feedback at precisely their level of writing, the process includes approximately eight steps for the correcting of spelling and typographical errors, obtaining a concordance, printing a new draft and checking it for phrasal and some mechanical errors, and takes about 20 minutes in all for a five-page paper. With a printout of the errors or potential errors in hand, the student corrects the draft copy and enters the corrections into the word processor. Based on discussions by students, it is evident that such a system teaches them not just the particular errors, but the categories of errors, so that students are able to start looking for wordiness, redundancy, meaningless usage, and so forth on their own before electronic editing. Many text-checking systems are currently available. However, since they are written primarily by commercial programers, their manuals and phrase dictionaries contain many lapses in literacy. Nevertheless, some of these drawbacks can be remedied, with the result being a program such as EDITOR. (HOD)

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TEACHING WITH THE TEXT CHECKERS

John Thiesmeyer
Dept. of English and Comparative Literature
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Geneva, NY 14456

Anyone who comes in contact with young people's writing today must be painfully aware of the low estate to which it is come. No elaborate analysis is required to note that bad spelling, once the problem of a relative few, is now the province of a majority, and that inability to spell also means inability to correct many typing errors. Poor grounding in mechanics, limited vocabulary, inability to distinguish standard usage from slang or jargon, a tendency to frame thoughts in clichés, a peppering of meaningless intensifiers like "incredibly" and "totally," a gift for redundancy and wordiness, and a blithe unconcern for gender bias in the language: these are hardly new characteristics of undergraduate prose, but their proliferation seems exponential.

I have chosen the above catalog carefully to comprehend much that we find wrong in student writing. I shall call them "phrasal" errors; they can be formally specified without rules, by simple lists. This provisional category does not include many solecisms--comma splices, failures of agreement between subject and verb or noun and pronoun, sentence fragments--which also characterize student composition, and which are not so easy to specify formally. My present point is only that the

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errors I am calling "phrasal" clutter up student prose to such an extent as seriously to hinder attention to more fundamental kinds of illiteracy, or to more general issues of writing like the content and logic of argument. In short, their detection and attempted remediation take up far too much of our time.

So much for a brief statement of part of the Writing Problem that we all know. As a member of the English staff at a small college it falls regularly to my lot to confront the problem in its naked splendor by teaching a section of Expository Composition. At my institution this is an elective, and is therefore peopled by students most of whom are poor writers even by the low standards of their own generation.

Like English teachers everywhere I have tried various strategies to attack the Writing Problem, most recently including elaborate schedules of rejection and resubmission designed to inculcate a minimal set of syntactic and usage rules. This last strategy has two major drawbacks: it nearly doubles the paper load on the instructor and, what is worse, like most others I've tried it doesn't work very well. Good writing, we can surely agree, means constant rewriting. The problem to which this paper is addressed, therefore, is how to teach effective revision to our inexperienced and reluctant students.

Last summer I began developing a system I call EDITOR, using microcomputers as word processors and incorporating commercially available text-checking software. EDITOR offers students critical feedback at precisely the phrasal level of their writing, and does so in a context that significantly enhances both motivation and opportunity for rewriting at that level. (It also responds to a few common conventional and mechanical errors such as doubled words, some misplaced punctuation,

improper spacing after punctuation, and failure to close quotations or parentheses.) I have used the system for two terms, and so far as I can tell the results are excellent. Perhaps the easiest way to give a sense of EDITOR's workings is to describe the course of a student composition from inception to submission.

Before submitting any paper to me for evaluation, each student in my sections had to undertake the following steps:

1. Compose a first draft--in longhand, on a typewriter or, if signup time permits, directly on the word processor. (Despite enthusiasm for working with the word processor, most of my students appear still to favor longhand for the first step.)

2. Type a draft of the paper into the word-processing system (if not already done), to be stored on disks.

3. Electronically proofread the stored copy for spelling and typographical errors, using a stored dictionary of over 75,000 words. Look up all words tagged as errors and correct them in the draft.

4. Run the corrected text through a concordance program, which lists all words in the paper in order of their frequency, and look for content words that occur more than three times per page. These are probably cases of excessive repetition. With the help of a thesaurus and dictionary, find appropriate alternatives and revise the text.

5. Print a copy of the corrected draft for reference, then have it checked, again electronically, against a list of over 2200 common phrasal errors: redundancies, wordiness, misuses, clichés, jargon, awkward phrases, misspelled homonyms, unnecessarily gender-specific terms, archaisms, slang and colloquialisms, trite or overworked expressions,

vague or meaningless intensifiers, failure to close quotes or parentheses, misplacing of punctuation outside quotation marks, doubled words or punctuation, and the like.

(I should emphasize that the phrase dictionaries are not meant to constitute a prescriptive definition of correct English usage, only to act as a kind of teacher's alter ego, to redirect the student's attention into the text. At the end of this paper under the heading "Illustration" I have reproduced part of a student composition, followed by a phrasal analysis from part of the EDITOR system. It will be seen that although the sample exemplifies by no means the worst of student writing, the system calls attention to a relatively large number of usages. Beyond the correction of outright errors, EDITOR's general strategy emphasizes clarity, precision, and concision. It will also be seen that the analysis is far from exhaustive.

The process to this point, of correcting spelling and typographical errors, obtaining a concordance, printing a new draft and checking it for phrasal and some mechanical errors, takes perhaps twenty minutes in all for a five-page paper. Thus the student gets a rapid, though limited, critique of her or his work, with both positive incentive and easy opportunity for correction.)

6. With a printout of the errors or potential errors in hand, correct the draft copy and enter the corrections into the word processor.

7. Proofread the electronic copy again for spelling and typos, and again for new phrasal and mechanical errors introduced during revision. Make corrections.

8. Finally, print a submission copy on good bond paper using a letter-quality printer, and submit for evaluation.

If this seems a complicated process to follow for a single composition we might nevertheless agree that it is complicated in the right ways, since it forces a minimum of two draft stages after the first, and often three or four before the final submission. I may add that each of my students learned the EDITOR system in about two weeks and used it each week for nine weeks in the course. Many of them liked it so much they scrambled for ex- tra hours on the word processors to write and revise papers for their other courses, and most have kept up with it during subsequent terms under no pressure to do so.

Several other comments are in order. First, it is important to note that every actual or potential error flagged by the system must be checked, and ignored or corrected, by the student. EDITOR itself makes no corrections, though in some cases "Remarks" are used to help define the problem. I find the system a promising alternative to what is supposed to happen, but seldom does, when a teacher hands back a paper with these same errors marked--days or weeks after the paper was written and usually with the grade already assigned, when student motivation to revise or to learn from mistakes is inevitably low.

Second, it is a remarkable experience to receive an entire set of papers with only two or three spelling and typographical errors--not per page, but per set. These are papers, moreover, that do not contain many of the most common mistakes and infelicities. No one's periods or commas are outside the close-quotation marks. There are few merely rhetorical questions. No final paragraphs begin with "In conclusion,"; most "its" have correctly been told from "it's." No one says "due to the fact that" or "the reason is because" or "centered around" or "end result" or "could

of" or "utilize" or "newsmen" or "maximize" or "lifestyle" or "blatantly" or . . . I could go on and on. It is no small pleasure, furthermore, to receive a set of papers none of which is typed on flimsy or smeared on "eraseable" paper.

Third, and perhaps most important, in our discussions and conferences my students have shown clear signs that they are learning, not just the particular errors which are sufficiently characteristic of each one's work that they recur often in EDITOR's analyses, but the categories of error. They are starting to look for wordiness, redundancy, meaningless usage, hackneyed phrases, questionable gender reference and the rest on their own, before electronic editing; they are even learning some of the punctuation conventions I had despaired of teaching in any conventional way. What appears to be happening, in other words, is precisely what one has always wished to happen in response to the traditional, post-facto marking-up of student papers. (EDITOR now includes a "game" program that quizzes students on the phrasal errors by category, to reinforce this kind of learning.)

Finally: even the good results I have obtained provide no substitute for normal classroom instruction, for the teacher's hard work in reading papers, or for time spent in individual conferences. Word processors cannot replace good teachers, but with their aid the teaching can begin at a higher level of student competence.

The Administration of my institution and some of my colleagues are sufficiently optimistic about EDITOR's results to sponsor the experiment on a larger scale: we will try it next with a quarter of our incoming freshmen.

In the remainder of this paper I will offer some particulars and some criticisms of text-checking systems, hoping to benefit those who may be interested in similar investigations.

EDITOR uses Radio Shack machines and word-processing software: unglamorous, reliable, and relatively inexpensive. Any good word processor will serve, however, and most have spelling-checker software available. Experience suggests that fewer than 50,000 words in a spelling dictionary is inadequate: the collective working vocabulary of a group of students appears considerably larger than those of its members. Students confronted repeatedly with correctly spelled words tagged as possible errors will lose confidence in the checker.

Text checking at the phrase level is offered by several programs currently available or forthcoming. I have examined three of the best known: Philip Manfield's "Grammar Option" for Electric Webster (1982; Cornucopia Software, P.O. Box 6111, Albany, CA 94706), Wayne Holder's Punctuation + Style (1982; Oasis Systems, 2765 Reynard Way, San Diego, CA 92103), and Bruce Wampler's Grammatik (1981; Wang Electronic Publishing [formerly Aspen Software], Tijeras, NM 87059). These programs can be purchased to run on most microcomputers, and they are similar in operation. Bell Laboratories' Writer's Workbench, available to run on UNIX operating systems, and IBM's Epistle, scheduled for release this summer, are more elaborate, mainframe-based text-analysis systems which also include spelling checkers and phrase dictionaries.

The currently available text-checking programs have considerable virtues. Punctuation + Style has an excellent mechanical-error checker, for example, and its manual discusses writing problems intelligently. Grammatik has great flexibility, offering the user or teacher a variety of

ways to structure its analysis and output. Electric Webster is designed to integrate closely into the word-processing system it is associated with.

On the other hand, all of these programs have significant drawbacks for teaching. Written primarily by programmers, they contain many lapses in literacy themselves in their manuals and phrase dictionaries. Worse, they are anheuristic: they do not discriminate between actual errors in usage and questions of judgment or taste; they suggest "correct" substitutions for virtually all words and phrases questioned, sapping the writer's initiative and promoting a bland, lowest-common-denominator prose. Some, like Electric Webster, require that the user revise directly on screen rather than in a context of printed drafts and comments. They are also difficult for the student to master quickly because of their elaborate menus of options and commands. Their phrase dictionaries are small: none of the software I have mentioned, including the mainframe programs, includes more than about 750 items. Furthermore, they are all irritatingly inconsistent; for example, Grammatik will properly identify "connect together" as redundant but fail to note the equivalent redundancies "connects together," "connected together," and "connecting together." Such lacunae are legion among the checkers I have investigated.

(The mainframe systems raise other kinds of problems in their provison for elaborate statistical analysis of texts, much of it based on mindless number-crunching, but that is a subject for another paper. The micro checkers can provide some crude statistics as well; their implications and uses need careful consideration by the teacher.)

Some of the drawbacks can be remedied, with effort. Working with

Grammatik as a central component of the EDITOR system, I have trebled the size of its original phrase dictionaries; my rough estimate is that they must be at least doubled again before we can hope to catch most of the common phrasal errors students commit, but increments require many hours of analysis and cross-checking. My wife Elaine, an English professor at Rochester Institute of Technology, and I have redesigned parts of Grammatik to make it easier for students to use, and have corrected a number of its internal deficiencies (incorrect counting of sentences, misunderstanding of some typographical conventions, awkward formatting of output, inadequate labelling of errors).

Our labors are probably typical of what is needed to tailor the checker programs, designed for a business or home environment, for classroom use. The results seem worth the trouble. By including any undesirable locution in a phrase dictionary we can tell the checking program, in effect, "If this turns up, call it to the author's attention!" Our language may well contain an infinity of phrases, as Noam Chomsky and others have speculated, and any attempt to characterize them all as correct or incorrect, awkward or graceful, is doomed. But the average student writer uses a tiny fraction of the language's potential, and within that fraction some errors and infelicities are disproportionately common. The ability of a word-processor-based system, such as I have here described, to trap just these offenses and cause the student to revise them before the final draft is typed is a boon on both sides of the teacher's desk.

ILLUSTRATION

I. Sample text (numbers added for easy reference):

<1>Although, there are many different and adequate definitions for the word "truth," my own definitions about truth relate to my conceptions of the words "honesty" and "faithful". <2>I search for truth in my friends and family.If friends and family are faithful, they will be honest with me. <4>Consequently, when friends are honest, they are telling me their true thoughts and/or feelings. <5>Even though I have made the relationship between truth, honesty and faithfulness appear to be quite simplistic, the actual process of finding truth is long and forever on going.

<6>In order to find truth in others a person must be able to find truth within him/herself. <7>One way to recognize that truth has been found, is if the person can express him/herself without worrying about whether or not he/she has made a friend terrifically upset. <8>If a friend is faithful he/she must be able to express his/her thoughts in such a manner as to be honest and truthful. <9>However, true friends will also be understanding and appreciative of each others feelings.†

II. EDITOR's analysis (using modified Grammatik):

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*In sentence 1:  although,        -- Punctuation error
*In sentence 1:  relate to        -- Vague, flabby diction
*In sentence 1:  ".               -- Punctuation error
*In sentence 3:  .                -- Punctuation error
   REMARK:  add space(s)?
*In sentence 4:  consequently,    -- Awkward usage
*In sentence 4:  true             -- Commonly misused word
   REMARK:  elusive word, often meaningless
*In sentence 4:  and/or           -- Awkward usage
*In sentence 5:  relationship     -- Commonly misused word
   REMARK:  relation?
*In sentence 5:  appear to be     -- Wordy phrase
*In sentence 5:  quite            -- Vague, flabby diction
*In sentence 5:  simplistic       -- Commonly misused word
   REMARK:  simple?
*In sentence 5:  on going         -- Spelling error
*In sentence 6:  in order to      -- Wordy phrase
*In sentence 7:  is if            -- Incorrect usage
*In sentence 7:  whether or not   -- Redundant phrase
*In sentence 7:  terrifically     -- Worthless modifier
*In sentence 8:  as to            -- Awkward usage
*In sentence 9:  true             -- Commonly misused word
   REMARK:  elusive word, often meaningless
*In sentence 9:  each others      -- Spelling error
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†Part of an actual student paper, reproduced without changes.